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TAGS: PGOV PHUM VE

SUBJECT: KILLING OF STUDENTS LEADS TO PROTEST, GOV RESPONSE

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ABELARDO A. ARIAS FOR REASONS 1.4 (d)
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SUMMARY

¶1. (C) The killing of three university students June 27 prompted protests at universities across Venezuela in early July, culminating in the student presentation of demands for justice to National Assembly President Nicolas Maduro on July ¶12. Some two dozen criminal investigative police (Cicpc) and military intelligence (DIM) officers killed the three students during an operation to find the killer of a DIM officer, according to press reports. Minister of Justice Jesse Chacon dismissed dozens of Cicpc officials soon after the incident and the alleged perpetrators were put in custody for the investigation. The incident has highlighted the propensity of Venezuela's security authorities to shoot first and ask questions later. Pro-Chavez legislators and officials, echoing broad concerns over how Venezuela's police operate, said the incident highlights the need to move forward on a national police law, which opponents have criticized as a vehicle for centralizing police powers under Chavez. End summary.

"They Shot Them Like Dogs"

¶2. (U) Security forces killed three students - Leonardo Gonzalez, Erick Montenegro, and Edgar Quintero - and wounded three others near a Caracas police checkpoint on the night of June 27. The team of Venezuela's investigative police (Cicpc) and military intelligence (DIM) stationed at the checkpoint was searching for those responsible for the murder of a fellow agent earlier that weekend, according to press reports. The Ministry of Interior and Justice June 29 said the students failed to stop at the checkpoint because they were afraid they would be robbed by the armed, masked and non-uniformed police officers. As their car accelerated, an officer's gun discharged, hitting another member of the security team manning the checkpoint. Security forces, believing the shot had come from the students' car, opened fire, the Ministry reported.

¶3. (U) The official version of events soon came under question however, as forensic tests showed that none of the students had fired a weapon, and survivor and other eyewitness accounts began to circulate. According to eyewitness accounts reported in the press, the students were fired upon as they accelerated past a police checkpoint. The students stopped the car, trying to find the family of one of the passengers to get help. The security forces chased down the group, shot Gonzalez, and beat Montenegro and Quintero before shooting them multiple times. Autopsy results released July 10 showed that Quintero and Montenegro were shot six and 11 times respectively, and that each had received shots to the head. Leonardo Gonzalez was shot only once - through his right eye.

¶4. (U) Eyewitness accounts that the group identified themselves as students to the police and pleaded for mercy corroborated survivor declarations to the prosecution that they had identified themselves to the police. Minister of Interior Jesse Chacon confirmed eyewitness allegations that another group of police returned to the crime scene later the night of June 27, telling reporters July 12 that he had proof that a patrol was ordered to return to the site to plant guns where the bodies of the three students had fallen.

Students Protest Impunity

¶5. (U) University students across Venezuela protested police impunity and demanded justice in the case of June 27 killings. A June 30 protest by 150 University Santa Maria students shut down streets around the university, and by the weekend protests had spread outside of Caracas and to universities across the country. Attorney General Isaias Rodriguez met with student protesters July 1. The protests

culminated in a 300 person march to the National Assembly July 12. Along the way, chavista groups accosted demonstrators repeatedly and Caracas Mayor Juan Barreto tried

at one point to block the students' march with a truck on which he stationed girls dancing. By the time the group reached the entrance of the National Assembly, only 80 of the original 300 remained. Student leaders demanded that National Assembly President Nicolas Maduro form a commission to investigate the June 27 killings, censure Minister of the Interior and Justice Jesse Chacon, and cease to use the students' deaths as an excuse to create a national police force. University leaders have called for a national demonstration July 19.

Prosecution Promises Swift Justice

16. (U) On July 2, the court admitted charges of premeditated murder, attempted murder and unlawful use of a weapon against 26 agents (21 DIM, 5 Cicpc). The judge denied the prosecution's request to charge the agents with altering the crime scene, illegal entry, public intimidation, abuse of authority and forging a public document. The judge also ordered protection measures for the three students who survived the June 27 incident. The 26 accused are currently detained in the Special Forces Brigade of the Cicpc. A trial date has not yet been set.

Investigative Police In GOV's Sights

17. (U) Minister of the Interior and Justice Chacon announced the dismissal of six Cicpc section chiefs July 2. Chacon justified the decision in his announcement, claiming that the section chiefs should be held responsible for the actions of those under their command who he alleged "planted" evidence at the crime scene the night of June 27. President Chavez condoned the decision during his weekly television broadcast 'Alo Presidente' July 3, commenting that "We cannot have assassins with police identification on the streets killing people...we have to clean up the police." Attorney General Rodriguez confirmed in a press release July 6 that reorganization was in the works for Cicpc, however he denied that the DIM was also on the slate for an "intervention." Subsequently, Chacon made public the retirement of 4 of 5 directors of Cicpc July 8, sparing only the Director General. Chacon announced the retirement of an additional 133 Cicpc agents on July 12.

National Assembly Moves National Police Law Up On Its Agenda

18. (U) GOV leadership began the call for the creation of a national police force following President Chavez's July 3 Alo Presidente broadcast. Chacon supported the creation of a national police force July 4, stating that it "constituted a means of cleaning up the police." Vice-President Jose Vincente Rangel followed suit July 7, claiming that the state was obligated to give Venezuelans a modern Police Law that "permits the police to operate in the service of the state and not against its citizens." President Chavez turned again to the theme of police restructuring on the July 10 Alo Presidente broadcast, during which he severely criticized the Cicpc and Chacon's performance.

19. (U) Pro-gov political party Podemos asked National Assembly leadership July 4 to "dust off" the National Police Law because a reorganization was needed after the June 27 student killings. The National Police Law passed a first reading July 2004, but has not progressed in the past year. The law under debate would restructure autonomous local and state police forces into a national police force.

10. (U) Opposition leaders questioned the GOV's motives for the law. Juan Carlos Caldera, of Primero Justicia, asserted July 4 that Chavez was attempting to resolve the problem of police excess by eliminating institutions, and thereby "concentrating more and more power" in his own hands. Pro-opposition MAS party deputy Carlos Tablante also voiced his concerns, claiming July 9 that the GOV "(is) attempting to create a national police because it is in their interests...the obvious intention is to exercise more political control over the police." Opposition parties sought July 7 to censure Minister of the Interior Chacon, however the National Assembly rejected this motion July 12.

Comment

11. (C) The GOV adeptly played the political opportunity provided by public outrage over the June 27 student killings

to its own advantage. The replacement of investigative police force (Cicpc) leadership will tighten GOV control over this organization. The Military Intelligence Directorate (DIM) is escaping attention for the moment as the Ministry of Interior takes the public brunt. However, with the change of Ministers of Defense complete, the DIM's role and activities are likely to draw greater scrutiny. New Minister of Defense, Admiral Ramon Orlando Maniglia, was recently quoted as stating that there would be a process of revision and organization at the DIM as well.

¶12. (C) There continues to be student interest in protesting the killings and in assuring that there is no cover-up. Yet another student demonstration in Caracas is scheduled for July 19. The protests are not partisan - no opposition party has tried to latch onto them - and thus the GOV must be cautious in responding to them.

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